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THE NATIONAL NEST-STIRRING.

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A DISCOURSE ON THE TIMES

DELIVERED IN THE

West Spruce St. Presbyterian Church,

SABBATH MORNING, MAY 5, 1861,

BY

REV. WILLIAM P. BREED.

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SERMON.

As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings; so the Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him.—*Deut.* xxxii. 11.

Abundant evidence appears on the sacred page that the writers, many of them at least, were close, if not strictly scientific, observers of nature. Of the eagle they frequently speak; of his swiftness—"swift as an eagle flieth;" of his proverbial keenness of vision—"his eyes behold afar off;" of his graceful wheeling and curving on the wing, vanishing like a speck in the blue vault in one direction and reappearing in another—"The way of an eagle in the air is too wonderful for me, I know it not;" and withal, of the combined cunning and daring with which the place for the nest is selected, far from the reach of human arm and artillery, and from fear of invasion by beast or serpent.

This manifest familiarity with the habits of this bird makes it probable that the allusions in our text are based upon actual observation.

The time has come for the eaglets to rise from a condition of dependence, to the higher one of self-support. They have long enough enjoyed the protection of others, it is time that they go forth and protect themselves. They must not be nestling there for ever. They must learn by experiment what powers God has lodged in their cunningly formed wings, those sharp, curved claws and beak. The time has come for them to know

the luxuries of lashing the air with their pinions, of piercing the cloud and soaring above the storm; also what glorious views lie beneath that lofty height, whither human eye can no longer follow the receding form.

So the parent bird stirs up the nest, drives her brood from its soft linings out upon the bare rock, perhaps thrusts them from the ledge over the abyss, and then dropping, like a meteor, she intercepts their fall, catches them upon her wings, and bears them to a place of safety. And by such aid and tuition the eaglet becomes an eagle, the nestling a builder of nests and feeder of young. In a word, the young eagle is thus advanced to a higher and nobler state of being.

Now, in this dying song of Moses, from which our text is taken—a song at once commemorative and prophetic—the sacred poet seems to see Egypt as the nest, Israel as the nestling, and Jehovah as the parent eagle.

That nestling must leave the nest. Israel must leave Egypt, else there can be no David, no Solomon, no temple, no Messiah. Israel must leave Egypt voluntarily.

To this end there must be a nest-stirring. Nestled there on the banks of the Nile, fed by a grateful nation with a bounty, the memory of which, in after days, led to bitter, regretful complaints, when "Israel wept again, and said, Who shall give us flesh? We remember the fish that we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic." Thus provided for and happy, what shall send them forth, through a sad severing of ties, long, weary marches, woes and privations, to the high destiny which awaited them? Their nest must be stirred! Oppression must come! The taskmaster must wield the lash! "Their lives must be made bitter with hard bondage in mortar and brick, and in all manner of service in the field." Their new-born babes must be strangled or cast into the Nile. Thus was their nest stirred up; and the reluctant eaglets, thrust from the rock-ledge, caught on Jehovah's wings, and borne in a mighty flight to their new nest among the mountains of Judea.

Here, then, we have an illustration of that style of providen-

tial dealing whereby the pupil is advanced through pain, and it may be through blood, from one stage of existence to a higher and a nobler. It is that kind of discipline in which the sharp spur is applied to thrust its object onward to and through another stage of development. Thus it is that eaglets become eagles. Thus Israel, an insignificant fragment of the Egyptian nation, becomes the Israel of David and Solomon and Jesus.

This principle of Providential dealing is often illustrated in the case of families and individuals, in both their temporal and spiritual experience.

But the figure, as employed by Moses in the text, points directly and immediately to a national nest-stirring; to the transfer of Israel from Egypt to Canaan, and the means and instrumentalities of that transfer. Between two millions and three millions of souls are to exchange their homes upon the green Nile-banks for new homes in a land flowing with milk and honey.

And, brethren, we need not say that we here, to our amazement, found ourselves in the midst of a great national movement—a movement felt and participated in by every one of our thirty millions of people. Every family is stirred to its centre. Significant badges glisten and flutter from the arms and bosoms of even the little ones. The air is alive with banners, and every bosom and every brain palpitates with life. Through every brain thoughts roll, billow upon billow, in restless succession. Through every bosom, sentiment, emotion, high passion surges. Every heart throbs as it never throbbed; every eye kindles as it never kindled. And of course the tongue is not silent. Torrents of words roll out upon the air—some desponding, some exulting—some despairing, some full of hope—some very sad, some very cheerful—some of high daring, some proud and boastful, some fierce and revengeful.

Nor is this all. Thought and passion have emerged into action—resolute, self-sacrificing, tremendous action. The husbandman has left his plough in the unfinished furrow; the fisherman has left unmended nets upon the shore; the smith has dropped his hammer and the carpenter his plane; the

clerk and the merchant have left the counting-room, and the man of wealth his parlor; and the highways are bristling with bayonets, and thundering trains filled with men—laden, not with heavy orders for merchandise, but with heavy knapsacks and cartridge boxes.

The midnight ear is startled with the sound of the rolling drum; quiet villages are converted into camps; the very citizen upon the street walks with a martial air, and beats the pavement with a martial tread; and the press and the telegraph palpitate with the excited utterances of the hour.

If, then, there ever was a movement among men that was national, this is such. We propose now to make this movement the subject of some reflections; forewarning you, however, that our eye is to be turned less to its secular and political than its moral aspects; and our remarks will bear less upon our active duties as citizens, than upon the hues with which we should seek to invest this movement in our apprehensions,—the tone of spirit which should characterize us as we go forth to meet its demands and responsibilities.

Living and participating in it as we do, it becomes us, as rational beings, to cite this movement before the bar of Reason, and interrogate it as to its character and import. Every great movement among men has a soul as well as a body, and a purpose and aim as well as a soul. And let no one think of, or dread this as an aimless, soulless avalanche. Nay, it has a character to unfold—a task to execute. What is that character, and what that task?

First and most obviously, God is in it to accomplish some special, important end.

One evidence of this we find in *its suddenness.* It has fallen upon us like a thunderbolt from a shining sky. So suddenly has it burst upon us that, stunned and confounded, we find ourselves asking, "Is not this after all a troubled dream?" But yesterday, as it were, we were a peaceful, united nation; now what—now where are we?

And its arrival is not only sudden but without *all connection with human aims and purposes.* Men had their aims and

purposes. One man, one party, aimed at one thing, another at another; but this particular juxtaposition of things no one aimed at—no one prayed for.

Then, it was not only sudden and undesigned by man, but *it was anticipated by none.* Who so keen-sighted as even six months ago to have shaped his affairs with reference to a condition of things like that which now presents itself?

Once more: another evidence of some extraordinary providential design therein is found in its disconnection with *all apparently adequate causes.*

What account can we, as American citizens, give to ourselves—what plea can we make at the bar of civilization and humanity, in justification of this condition of things? Some account, some plea, is imperatively demanded. Those hundreds of thousands of British poor, who earn their daily bread by weaving and spinning our cotton, demand it. Philosophic and philanthropic statesmen of the old world, who have been watching with intense interest the hopeful political phenomena of the new, iterate the demand; and it is reiterated by the millions of poor souls who have been so long peering westward from between the grim bars of foreign despotisms. These all cry out together for some rational account of this sudden subversion of the fairest political structure man ever built, God ever smiled upon, or human beings ever enjoyed!

"What aileth thee, O America?" they cry. Have tyrannical rulers worn thee out with oppressions? Has an intolerable taxation exhausted thy coffers, and driven thy children forth begging for bread? Has a relentless censorship sealed up the lips of the press, and has man been compelled to silence till resistless thought-currents, dammed up within the bosom, have burst all barriers, and rushed forth in all "the pomp and circumstance" of civil war? Or has religious freedom been invaded? Has some imperious Nebuchadnezzar set up an image in the plain of Dura, and heated the fiery furnace for all who refuse to bow the knee?

Brethren, how, in the name of reason and humanity, can we answer these questions? Humanly speaking, a more utterly

causeless national convulsion has never been witnessed under the sun.

Yes, God is in this movement. Not that man is not in it too—in it to his condemnation—in it to his sorrow! But God is suffering man to do apparently causeless and really irrational things, that out of it all, "He, who doeth according to his will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth," may bring his own appointed results. At what results is Divine Providence aiming? Is there any divination by which we can reach the import and object of this movement?

To this question three different replies may be suggested. First, it is final and destructive. Second, it is chiefly a sore, well-merited chastisement for national shortcomings and transgressions. Thirdly, it is a great national nest-stirring, through the dust, smoke, confusion and agonies of which God is leading our nation to noble service, to better days, and to brighter skies. To this last view we shall cling till driven from it by bitter, disappointing experience.

Many considerations forbid our adopting the first and most dismal of all, viz., that we are now in the midst of the throes of national death.

We *have* feared the worst. We have dreaded a national overthrow by that direst of all forms of death, universal anarchy. For a time it seemed as if the Death-angel had waved his fatal wing over the nation's heart, and that a general and all-pervading gangrene had set in. One day a finger dropped off, the next a hand; now a foot, then an arm. Single cities began to rave of solitary independence. Intelligent and worthy citizens of Pennsylvania stood ready to pledge their lives and fortunes to the work of erecting our noble commonwealth into an independent republic. But that day is gone by. That process has reached its limit. The heart of the nation, quickened once more after the paralysis of the hour, beats still that the deaf may hear it!

But now may not death be staring us in the face in another form? Is not God, in rebuke for our unfaithfulness and in punishment for our sins, suffering us to fall upon one another,

that, like the wretched Midianites at the crash of Gideon's pitchers, and shout of his voices and blaze of his lamps, we also may be "set every man against his brother" to mutual extermination?

Beloved hearers, without claim either to inspiration or extraordinary sagacity, we answer emphatically and confidently, No! It is out of all historic analogy that a nation endowed and accoutred as is ours be smitten with the leprosy of death in the very morning of its days. And it is equally foreign to the prevailing tone of present providential dealings in the world. While God is blowing the resurrection trumpet over long-buried Italy, who can think that he is giving commission to the pale horse and his rider to make our land a land of silence and desolation? God is now marshalling his armies to fight great battles for the Truth; and think you he will just now disband one of the strongest and best appointed of them all?

No! We shall live and not die! We do not feel like dying. There is no cold sweat upon the brow, no death-chill on the form. On the contrary, there never was a finer flush on the national cheek—never a finer gleam in the national eye. Our national government is stronger this hour than it has been for twenty years—strong in a new consciousness of strength! The despatches which have just left our shores for European courts will convey to them the intelligence that, should our nation be divided to-morrow, there lies north of the dividing line a nation which, for cause seen and appreciated, can suddenly bury bitter partisan feuds, fling to the winds party names and partisan issues, and, in two weeks' time, precipitate a hundred thousand armed men into the field, and double that number in two weeks more, if the call demand; a nation that, in two weeks' time, can, in individual donations, lay some thirty millions of dollars on the altar of patriotism; a nation abounding in mothers, who bring an only son to the camp, and leave him there with mingled benedictions and regrets that the number was not ten instead of one!

Certainly this looks very little like dying. And however events may shape themselves under the moulding hand of

Almighty God, let every one of us place fears of national overthrow among the very remotest of our apprehensions.

The second interpretation of this posture of affairs regards it as chiefly a chastisement for national sins. We have sinned —sinned against God and against man. We have sinned by pride and profanity, drunkenness and licentiousness, sabbath-breaking and mammon-worship. And no one can doubt that this visitation is of the nature of a scourge. This is involved in the very idea of a nest-stirring. It was so with Israel. Untold calamities came upon that nation in connection with their transfer from the Nile to the Jordan. The intervening pathway was marked by a line of more than six hundred thousand graves!

But we still cling to the full idea of our text in interpreting this providential dispensation, and this couples chastisement with advance; making chastisement the instrument and means of advance. God is hereby administering to this nation an afflictive disciplinary baptism in the cloud and in the sea, for a fresh entrance upon the historic career. This is a great national nest-stirring, preparatory to a flight to a better land, in which the eaglet is to become an eagle; in which America the less is to become America the greater.

What nation, from Rome to ours, ever reached the acme of its greatness and power without the dread tuition of internal convulsion? It was through many such bloody scourgings that the British constitution reached its present pitch of perfection, and the British empire its present pitch of power.

The iron, unscrupulous reign of Henry the Seventh; the tyrannies of the carnal, disgusting Henry the Eighth; the crimson rule of the Bloody Mary; the imbecilities and tyrannies of the Stuarts, interrupted by the glorious Cromwellian parenthesis, and terminated by the glorious Revolution, all attended with blood and sorrow, wrote each one of them some clause in the British constitution, some word on the British heart, that has since been in their influence "like rain upon the mown grass, and as showers that water the earth."

And this hour of our surprise and anguish is a pen in the

hand of God to write upon our hearts, our nation, our constitution, some sentence, some paragraph, which nothing but just such a convulsion could write, and which, unwritten, would leave our national career a fragment or a failure!

Who can rise from the contemplation of the origin and growth of our nation, the prodigality of its resources, the splendor of its national equipments, without the deep conviction that it has been ushered upon the stage to act no secondary part in the great drama? And who can collate our political career and these endowments, and not feel that as yet we have rendered the world no adequate service?

Brethren, have these infinite resources, this best of constitutions, this imperial expanse of territory, this unfettered freedom of thought and speech, been entrusted to us merely that we may unblushingly show in the eyes of a world that blushes for us, how execrably corrupt municipal governments, legislatures, and national administrations can become, and how we can elect a President to be devoured before our eyes by hordes of of hungry office-seekers? God forbid!

No: the time has come for a new baptism, in distress, in tears, it may be in blood—it may be in one another's blood. The sea at which we are to receive this baptism may be one whose billows are hunger and thirst and nakedness, weeping and wailing and woe. It may be a trial which shall leave desolate fields and green graveyards.

But let no one suggest that this accompanying anguish forestalls our idea of beneficent results! No! In all afflictive providences, which are not strictly penal, but rather disciplinary in their nature, whether they be individual or national, you may gauge the magnitude of the beneficent result by the intensity of the antecedent and instrumental sorrow. God is a God of mercy and love. He never afflicts willingly, nor grieves the children of men. He can tell you more than you ever knew or dreamed of, the true significance of the tear on the cheek or sigh in the bosom; and human sorrows are too costly to be wasted. These are pearls that he never casts

before swine. And every such path that he sows with these jewels, leads to rewards that are abundantly compensatory.

Fully assured, then, that God is in the vessel,—that his strong hand holds the helm, and his own streamer floats from the mast-peak, we may humbly and confidingly leave definite results to him. Whether there are to be battles, and how many,—whether the struggle is to be brief or protracted, and into what particular mould events are ultimately to be cast, are matters which God will determine; and the results, whatever they may be, we all are, or should be willing to accept at his hands.

In conclusion, let us find in this view of the movement which is upon and around us, the *tone of spirit* which should characterize us during these eventful times. Inasmuch as this is a great National Nest-stirring under the hand of God, on the one hand sorely afflictive, and on the other disciplinary and preparatory to a higher and more efficient service, let us go forth to it in solemn seriousness, and also with courage and hope!

In the name of pity and mercy let everything like levity be excluded from our thoughts and utterances! He must be at once sightless and heartless who can either fail to see, or seeing fail to appreciate, and respect the tide of anguish which must roll along the channel of this movement. The fact that the war, if war come, must come in that most afflictive and exhaustive of all forms, civil war; the distressing fact that the combatants are children of the same nation, who in other days have shouted together under the same flag, exulted together over the same historic story, and in view of the same enchanting prospects; that the officers who give the command on opposing sides, were taught the mysteries of the sanguinary art by the same teachers, in the same academy, where were formed those precious and unique ties of friendship which fellow students only know; the heartrending fact, that the line of division runs through households, separating brother from sister, mother from son, acquaintance from acquaintance, all unite to brand all levity as criminal and heartless!

will have drunk up all our strength. There is something else for *men* to do in such an hour than merely to brood over ills, heap loads upon the spirits, and make the gloom deeper by desponding, despairing words, and by ever-deepening sadness of brow!

How often did God rebuke Israel for such conduct during the flight by which he bore them to their promised land? On the Red Sea-shore, "Israel cried out unto the Lord." And they said to Moses, "Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness? And the Lord said unto Moses wherefore criest thou unto me? Speak unto the children of Israel *that they go forward.*"

And may we not, and must we not, take this providence as a great Nest-stirring in which Jehovah is bearing us on eagles wings to a better land? Assured of this, is there nothing in its spirit and aim, nothing even in its concomitants and already realized results, to forbid excess of gloomy apprehension and minister refreshment and relief to the spirit?

We live in extraordinary times. Thought, passion, plays not in holiday ripples, but heaves in billows! A day is crowded into an hour, a week into a day, a month into a week! This day forms one of the hinges of history. It is a day in which "the bell of time strikes another hour!" It is the hour of a Red Sea passage, of a Jordan passage. Some will be drowned in the transit, but the great host will reach the opposite shore, and there sing with Moses and Miriam the song of thanksgiving! It is an hour instinct with vast ideas, pregnant with vast issues. This movement is urged on by mighty impulses, and its progress is attended with almost superhuman self-sacrifices, with unprecedented and unbounded liberalities, with marvellous display of kind humanities, and its ultimate aim is gloriously beneficent!

It were folly to deny that some are hereby plunged into swarms of new, and doubtless in many instances fatal temptations, but even to this is there *no* compensatory good? Is it nothing that a people reproached the world over as Mammon worshippers, suddenly melt down their Idol, cast it into coin,

Then these invaded firesides, these circles in our midst, which kneeling this morning around the family altar, missed those golden links; those breakfast tables, whose cheer was dampened by the presence of the vacant chair; the parting tears that gushed over the young man's neck, the yearnings of parents and sisters hearts after the youth in camp, fort or field, all these administer a stinging rebuke to levity! And the inevitable miseries and demoralizations of war, the exposures to temptations, profanity, drunkenness, Sabbath-breaking, licentiousness, forbid it!

Besides, the prostration of business, the arrest laid upon commerce, the bankruptcies, the closed stores, and the incident domestic, inquietude and distress, condemn and forbid it!

Let all look upon and speak of the momentous work before us, with the solemn seriousness of men who have hearts to feel for the woes of their brethren.

But on the other hand, let us not forget that there is another side to this subject! Let us not overlook the privilege and duty, even with the tears on our cheeks, of looking out upon that angry sky courageously, hopefully! And to this end, it is imperative upon us not to suffer our attention to be engrossed, nor our minds to be, as it were, fascinated by the dark spirits that may hover around our tents. It is the duty of every one, in the spirit of a manly heroism, to avert the eye from the menacing sword, which gleams in hand, to the star of hope which reposes on the brow of this dispensation!

We are on shipboard, on a dangerous coast. The tempest howls through the rigging, angry clouds scud, "lightening lances" are driven across the sky. Rock and shoals are near. One man has fallen from the yards, another has been swept from the decks, a fresh force has just been sent to man the helm! Is it now wise or right for us, in huddled groups, in cabin or on deck, to think of nothing, and talk of nothing but actual ills, and menacing disasters? God forbid! Such a course is wrong, it is demoralizing! Ere long the cry will come for us to man the pumps, and then fear and despondency

and pour it out like water in voluntary contributions? Nothing that a whole nation sneered at so long as a mere mass of shrewd bargain-makers can suddenly exchange the minutiæ of commerce and trade for thoughts and interests of national magnitude? Nothing that multitudes who have hitherto grovelled in the kennels of society, and all their lives been a reproach to cities and a terror to good citizens, have found place in their souls for at least one high noble idea, that of their country and their national flag! Can this occupancy of such minds, with such an idea, for an hour or a month harm, may it not do good?

It is wrong, it is ungrateful, it is demoralizing, to throw ourselves upon the ground and seek to give up the ghost, because this great shadow has fallen upon our national pathway. For seventy years we have enjoyed a prosperity unequalled in the history of nations. Meanwhile every nation in Europe has been smitten with convulsion or revolution. Through what scenes has France passed? Once the victim of an outburst from the pit that filled the world with horror; twice overrun by foreign troops, and even now her all, apparently suspended upon the life of one man; one Austrian emperor dethroned and his successor terrified into a show of reform; and even Britain's noble Queen driven by violence or fear from Buckingham Palace to the Isle of Wight. And now our turn is come. But the cloud is "big with mercies and will break with blessings on our head."

Let us then, dear brethren, write COURAGE and HOPE upon our banner, and then nail that banner to the mast!

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